Sandy Short Program > > Second Oceanian Struggle

Part 1

There was a country known as Oceania.

It was famous for its koalas and kangaroos.

A military nation had suddenly risen there several decades before and that dictatorship had continued until very recently, but the intervention of an international coalition force had brought the age of those rulers to an end. The dark military which had spread fear among the people could no longer threaten the lives of all who lived there.

It was a perfect example of love and peace.

The countries which had previously been fighting each other had formed a coalition force and attacked a single evil. The good of mankind had protected the smiles of Oceania's people and built the bridge leading to new hopes and dreams!

However…

"Gwaaaaaaaaah!! Why are we all trying to kill each otherrrrrrrrrr!!?"

Quenser gathered strength in the depths of his gut to shout out as loud as he could while rolling across the desert sand.

He was a boy with silky blond hair, but his sex was hard to tell from his appearance. The impression he gave could change 180 degrees depending on whether he was wearing pants or a skirt.

Incidentally, there was a reason he was rolling.

The sandy ground was not perfectly flat. It had large ups and downs like the ocean surface on a wavy day. Quenser had wished to use the landscape itself to hide from his enemy, so he was rolling down one of those downward sloping hills.

Yes.

War had broken out in Oceania once more. And of all things, it was a dispute between the supposed allies of the coalition force. Otherwise, there would have been no reason to become so covered in sand as he hid behind cover.

However, he was not sure how effective hiding would be.

The enemy army's electronic equipment included several extremely sensitive sensors, but there was another extremely simple reason why this cover might not be effective.

The weapon Quenser was up against was over 50 meters tall.

It was a colossal weapon known as an Object.

Its reactor was cleaner and more powerful than a nuclear reactor and its spherical main body was covered by walls as thick as a nuclear shelter's. Over 100 different cannons both large and small extended in every direction from that main body. The Object looked less like a smart weapon that was equipped with the optimal equipment for the job and more like a bizarre machine that had gathered every weapon its designer could think of. Gathering 100 tanks would not be enough to defeat it. Even after a direct hit from a nuclear missile or two, that monstrous weapon would continue to move as its body melted like ice cream.

Naturally, a giant Object's line of sight was overwhelmingly higher than a human's.

The sand dunes that looked like cover from the ground might leave him completely exposed from a higher angle.

However…

(Even if it's only a 1% chance or less, I have to try everything I can to survive!! This isn't an opponent I can stand still and hope for the best with!!)

After he finally finished rolling down the sand dune, Quenser lay on the ground while covered in sand. The sand was quite hot from the powerful sunbeams beating down on it, but this was no time to worry about that.

The one piece of luck was that Quenser was not the enemy Object's top priority.

Quenser's side had an Object, too.

In fact, he and his comrades' entire reason for existing was to ensure the battlefield was in the best possible condition for their Object.

For that reason, the actual battle was fought between the two Objects.

For the blunt reason of the flesh-and-blood humans being unable to do anything, there was no need to fire on them.

However, this did not mean Quenser and the others were safe.

To repeat: Objects were monsters that measured at over 50 meters. When two of those monsters clashed, the scale was simply too great. The shockwave of firing a shell was enough to blow away the soldiers and one fragment of the armor pieces that were blown off and scattered about was enough to take their lives.

Every soldier on the battlefield had a single thought.

And that thought that Quenser and the others all had was…

(I'm not going to let myself get killed by my ally's shell or my enemy's armor!!)

As Quenser trembled and lay on the ground with all his strength, he heard his commander speaking over his radio. Her name was Froleytia, she had long silver hair and huge breasts, and she was obsessed with Japan.

"Continue the operation!! Don't think you can be paid from the country's tax money if you do nothing but lie around on the battlefield!! Stand up and support our big-sized princess!! If the Faith Organization Object breaches the defensive line at the 'castle gate', this will develop into a long, drawn-out war!!"

"Dammit. I'm going to have nightmares about this," groaned

Quenser as he glared at the enemy Object which was emitting a pressure similar to a great demon god.

(Why are members of the coalition force starting to kill each other?)

As the coalition force, they had all worked together to defeat the villains of the Oceanian military nation.

And now this Object was being used to take the lives of Quenser and his comrades.

“So that’s the Faith Organization’s second generation Object, the Strategic Antenna.”

Part 2

In the first half of the 21st century, the organization known as the United Nations collapsed.

A cynical journalist had once said that the world had turned to stained glass afterwards. A few new alliances were formed and the countries around the world were divided between a few different colors: the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization.

The Strategic Antenna trying to kill Quenser and his comrades was an Object belonging to one of those world powers, the Faith Organization.

“Hey, Mr. Student! Your arms, legs, and head weren’t blown off, were they!?”

In the confusion of the Object battle, Quenser had been separated from his companion, a boy named Heivia, but he came rolling over from a different sand dune.

Quenser and Heivia were the same age. However, Heivia was a bit more muscular. Compared to Quenser, he wore his military uniform better and the rifle in his hands did not look out of place. However, Heivia was actually an analyst who observed an enemy Object’s actions on radar and sensors to find a means of fighting it using its characteristics and idiosyncrasies.

With sand covering him from the top of his head to the inside of his boots, Heivia spoke in annoyance.

“I wish they would give us a break. The shockwaves alone are going to make me deaf.”

“Speaking of ears, I’ve gotten a lot of sand in mine. Is that bad?”

As they spoke, the Objects continued to fire shells and earthquake-like vibrations ran through the ground. The detailed sand dunes

were changing from moment to moment. As the Legitimacy Kingdom Object and the Faith Organization Object continued to carefully change their location and fire at each other, they gradually approached the two boys. Quenser and Heivia were forced to crawl along so as not to be swallowed up by an avalanche of sand. They of course tried to maintain some cover between themselves and their enemy whenever possible.

The mixture of sand and sweat was uncomfortable, but they did not have time to be bothered by it.

Heivia spat some sand out from his mouth and spoke in a displeased tone.

“Did you hear their Object’s name?”

“Strategic Antenna, right?”

“That’s what we call it in the Legitimacy Kingdom military.” A corner of his mouth twisted upwards. “Its official Faith Organization codename is Aphrodite. That’s the goddess of love and beauty!! Supposedly, they arranged the parabolic antennae and cannons to be reminiscent of a ring of blooming flowers!!”

“Wasn’t Aphrodite the goddess that started the Trojan War? …So does that mean the Strategic Antenna’s unit belongs to the Greek mythology area?”

“That’s a pretty big organization even in the religious Faith Organization. And that means they’ll have a pretty good Object at their disposal. As usual, we’re up against a brand new second generation Object,” said Heivia while half spitting out the words. “According to the report from the electronic simulation department, its radars and sensors were given more focus than its cannons. It has various methods to thoroughly jam any signal for 3000 kilometers around it and its own radars and sensors are modified to pinpoint anything’s location even in the middle of that jamming.”

“That explains that high-speed battle,” muttered Quenser in displeasure. “And our princess’s movements were odd, too. If the enemy is using a strategy like that, she probably can’t use any of

her mechanical targeting aids. She has to manually target the Strategic Antenna while it moves around that fast."

"It was originally meant to be used in the mountainous regions of Eastern Europe. I remember hearing something about the cliffs of Mount Olympus. That means this is better than it could be. If that thing was moving around this quickly on steep slopes while using its powerful jamming in a mountainous area that already affects radar signals, it would be almost impossible to find it."

"…I hate them," said a sudden girl's voice from Quenser's radio.

It was coming from the Legitimacy Kingdom's Object, the Baby Magnum. It seemed its pilot was chatting while fighting at high speed with the Strategic Antenna.

As a countermeasure to the Strategic Antenna's jamming, they were using special radios that could open almost 200 ports simultaneously to send and receive data. The partial remnants of the data that managed to penetrate the jamming on each port were compiled by the machine to form a single voice. However, they had no idea how long that would keep working. They were up against an Object that specialized in this after all.

"They pointed at me and called me a whore and slut that is trying to seduce the Greek soldiers."

"Wow."

"That isn't something you should say to a girl. It's like asking to be slapped."

Quenser and Heivia began arbitrarily cursing their enemy, but then a stray railgun shell struck the ground a short distance away. The steel shell was over a meter wide and it blew away the sand dunes around it.

A great explosion burst out.

They sensed it more from a vibration over all the skin on their body than they did from a vibration in their eardrums. The great mass of sand they had been using as cover vanished. Just as Quenser felt as

if gravity had disappeared, he was thrown almost three meters through the air. It did not matter that the shell had not directly hit them. The side effects were enough to send intense pain through that boy's body as if he had been punched and to almost rob him of all the oxygen in his body. He collapsed on the sandy ground and desperately tried to suck in air, but the only thing that entered his mouth was the fine-grained sand that had been blasted into the air.

"Ugh, dammit!! If it's not one thing, it's another!! Cough cough!?"

He had almost lost his sense of direction in that thick cloud of sand, but he could not stay where he was. While still lying down, Quenser began rolling across the sandy ground toward another sand dune.

The fun of seeing them joking around must have worn off because Froleytia's angry voice called out to them.

"Have you forgotten what your mission is? If not, repeat it back to me."

"We have to stop that giant ball!!"

"Yes. Due to the long period of battles, the Faith Organization's Strategic Antenna has been unable to receive its specialized maintenance for a while now. Its main cannon is the attachCOIL. Now, a question for our student, Quenser. What is a COIL?"

"A chemical oxygen iodine laser!! It's a traditional laser weapon that has been continually developed as far back as the age of bombers!!"

"The Strategic Antenna uses a combination of an Object reactor and an old-style COIL to create a relatively powerful main cannon. That is the attachCOIL."

Some might wonder how one could avoid a laser weapon that fires at the speed of light. If one carefully observed the laser main cannon, one could apparently detect minute movements such as the focusing of the lens just before it fired. The princess calculated her evasion timing by watching those pre-firing movements.

"According to the electronic simulation department's estimations,

the Strategic Antenna should be running out of the chemicals it needs to fire that optical weapon. The maintenance for its main cannon must be carried out at the maintenance base near Lake Carnegie 550 kilometers away from here. Our first interception operation carried out on its expected route through the Great Sandy Desert failed. If this second interception operation fails, the Strategic Antenna will almost certainly regain its full ability to fight. …Do you understand how important this is?"

"We do. The problem is that we can't move no matter how much we understand!! How about you come here and try!? Dammit. Is this really Oceania? Just to be sure, wasn't Oceania a peaceful country after the war ended!?"

"Quenser, let me give you a piece of advice. No matter how much you complain, you are the one who will be thrown into an even greater hell if this operation fails."

"I'm only a student sent to the battlefield to learn about Object design!!"

"I am in a good mood today, so I will give you a second piece of advice. Whether you are a baby, an old man, a sickly boy, or an unfortunate heroine, you are a soldier as soon as you stand on the battlefield with a weapon in hand. No one can complain if you kill and no one can complain if you are killed."

"Dammit!! I thought modern wars were fought between Objects and deadly battles between flesh-and-blood soldiers were a thing of the past!"

"Oh? You seem to have a lot of complaints, Quenser. I am not fond of rebellious subordinates. However, I try to do my best to help obedient subordinates."

"Then can you at least change into a sexy swimsuit before giving us our orders!? If you do, I'll be 100 times more motivated!!"

"How could you even tell over the radio?"

"Whether I can see it or not isn't the issue! What matters is having a

woman in a sexy swimsuit giving orders in an overbearing fashion!!"

Froleytia must have gotten fed up with it all because she ended the radio transmission.

Quenser clicked his tongue fairly seriously and glanced around. He found Heivia half buried under a crumbled sand dune and dug the boy out.

"Hey, Heivia! If you're gonna die, at least be of some use to me first!!"

"Thanks, Quenser. That comment lets me abandon you without guilt if I'm ever in a pinch," groaned Heivia as he began rechecking the parts of his rifle to make sure they had not been affected by the sand. "When Froleytia had her ass covered in that tight skirt and was pointing at a whiteboard with a pointer, she explained that our main mission is to set up an ambush, right?"

"Right. We have to bury that special 'floor heater' in the sand."

Objects were monstrous weapons that could continue running after receiving a nuclear attack or two. Normal explosives were not enough to handle them.

What Quenser and Heivia were discussing was not a plan to destroy the Strategic Antenna. It was a diversion meant to take away its mobility.

Objects used various different propulsion methods, but the primary method used static electricity. The massive energy produced by the reactor would create a great amount of static electricity below the Object which would allow it to hover above the ground.

In other words, if an electrical mat was placed on the ground that produced enough static electricity to disturb the power used to float the Object, the Object's movements could be stopped.

The Object sprayed out a large amount of static electricity repellant to more efficiently keep itself afloat, but a substance could be placed on the surface of the mat to neutralize that to a certain

extent.

While lying on the sand, Quenser spoke as if confirming something with himself.

“Normally, this strategy would be meaningless. Even if you caught the Object in the trap, it could blow away the ‘floor heater’ with a large caliber railgun or a low-stability plasma cannon. That would free it from the trap instantly.”

Heivia replied in an offhand manner.

“Yeah, Object armor can withstand a nuclear blast. If they need to get rid of a trap at their feet, they could probably use the weaker cannons on the very bottom to blow away the ground itself. No normal trap can strike a fatal blow.”

“But the conditions are different now. If we slip into a blind spot and activate the ‘floor heater’ below the Strategic Antenna’s feet in the middle of this tense Object vs. Object battle, we can stop it for anywhere from a few seconds to a dozen seconds. Our princess can finish it off with a main cannon blast in that time.”

“The problem,” continued Heivia, “is that our wonderful ‘floor heater’ is set up 30 kilometers from here. And it isn’t ready to activate because they counter attacked with everything they had before it was finished!!”

Thirty kilometers through a sandy desert was quite a high hurdle if they had to travel on foot.

“I thought we would have this finished already. Don’t they understand it just makes everything awkward if you show up before the party is ready?”

“Since the fish showed up before we could finish preparing the net, they’re all going to escape. We need to find a way to get that net ready before the battlefield reaches that point.”

“I have an idea,” said Quenser as he wiped sandy sweat from his brow. He pointed in what looked like a random direction. “Do you see that?”

“Eh? You mean that porn magazine someone dropped there?”

“No, not there! Can’t you see the off-road vehicle partially buried in that collapsed dune about 50 meters away!? Do you think we could run over there and get to the fishing area ahead of them?”

“But there’s no cover. I know these sand dunes aren’t much a shield against Object shells, but something is better than nothing. We’ll be filled with holes not even five seconds after we start running out in the open like that. Can’t you see all those Object armor fragments flying everywhere?”

“I thought you would say that, so I’ll suggest another option. Look in the opposite direction. A motorcycle is lying about 300 meters away.”

“It has a fair bit of cover, but that’s a long way. A stray shell could hit us while we make our way there.”

Heivia hid behind a sand dune and looked back and forth between the off-road vehicle and the motorcycle. But he eventually got sick of thinking.

“Let’s decide with a coin toss. Heads is the shorter route to the off-road vehicle.”

He flicked a silver coin a few meters straight up with his thumb.

Would it be heads or tails?

Before the answer arrived, the coin vaporized. A brilliant light similar to welding almost blinded the two boys.

The Strategic Antenna had fired one of its laser beam cannons.

“Okay! That sure as hell wasn’t heads!!”

As soon as Heivia yelled that, he and Quenser began running toward the motorcycle. Soon thereafter, the giant body of an Object cut through, leveling the spot they had been lying in not long before.

Part 3

After securing the motorcycle, Quenser and Heivia drove through the desert. Heivia was driving. They were headed for the fishing area where the 'floor heater' was waiting to be set up. If they did not complete the preparations before the Strategic Antenna arrived, that large catch would escape.

If it had not been for the low rumbling of the two Objects firing shells in the distance, the desert landscape would have held a sense of spaciousness not present in the noise of a city. The horizon could be plainly seen dividing the land of fine sand from the blue cloudless sky.

"Honestly, this scenery almost makes me forget about the war," said Heivia in annoyance. "I hope this pain-in-the-ass war ends soon so we can get some time to rest. If we get some leave around here, do you think we could stop by Roadshow City? That city was developed by the coalition forces during the Oceania war as a symbol of freedom. I want some time to just relax, y'know? I need a hell of a massage to heal my aching muscles and I need to jump into a pool that looks like a blue cocktail."

"Isn't the signing ceremony for Oceania's declaration of peace scheduled to take place there? You know, that thing where the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization were all going to gather together. But it seems Roadshow City has a lot of sandstorms, so it isn't very comfortable. They have information on sandstorms in their weather forecasts."

"Those things are even worse than fog or a blizzard. You can't see in any direction and you can't move. Before, we almost got stranded when we strayed from the unit."

"Yeah, but it turned out the maintenance base was only three meters ahead of us. …But the military has used the people's tax money to install special weather sensors throughout the desert as well as wired internet lines, so it must be affecting the military a

fair bit," complained Quenser lightly. "Come to think of it, that city also functions as a giant relay station for the wired internet lines, doesn't it?"

"Wouldn't a satellite connection be better in such a huge desert?"

"They have their reasons. Those sandstorms, for example."

"?"

Quenser and Heivia's radios beeped at the same moment.

The girl known as the princess who piloted the Legitimacy Kingdom Object was calling them.

"Will you have that 'floor heater' ready in time?"

"Well, we should have it done right away if you strip naked and put on cat ears and a tail."

"Heivia, don't forget to have her end every sentence with 'nyan'."

"If you can make jokes, I will assume you can make it."

"Make sure to buy us some time. And also make sure the Strategic Antenna doesn't catch on."

If they communicated by radio for too long, the information could be picked up by the Strategic Antenna. Also, distracting the princess in the middle of her high-speed battle could end up leading to their deaths. Quenser and Heivia quickly ended the conversation.

Heivia must have been fed up with it all because he started complaining again.

"Dahh. I really want to go on vacation somewhere. Got any recommendations? I want a world heritage kind of place that will cleanse the heart just to look at it."

"Inside a beautiful woman's skirt?"

"That would be the nicest to look at, I'll give you that, but there is

no way in hell I'm going there with you."

The two chatted, but they could not avoid talking about the war forever. After all, this was a problem that would decide their fate.

"The Faith Organization sure went on the offensive here."

"The dispute started over how the land would be divided up now that the military dictatorship has fallen. But they must be as low as the mafia if they're willing to bring out their guns just because they feel displeased with how much they got."

"What are we supposed to say to the people of Oceania? The coalition force was meant to end the violence of the military nation."

"I am a noble who wants to earn the achievements needed to inherit my family. You are a student who wants to learn about Object design on the battlefield. We're in no place to act all self-important. In the end, war is fought for people's personal convenience."

"I know that." Quenser almost impulsively said something, but stopped and carefully chose his words first. "I know that. But even so…"

"Well, another soldier is one thing, but I don't want to get an Oceanian civilian involved since they have no choice but to leave their future up to us."

Meanwhile, they arrived at the "fishing spot".

They stepped down from the bike and glanced around.

A giant V-shaped cliff jutted up in front of them. It was 20-30 meters tall. Those natural castle wall-like cliffs continued on and on to the left and right. The only path through was a 100 meter opening in front of them. That was where they were to set up the "floor heater".

"If it wants to, the Strategic Antenna can use its cannons to change the landscape and make its way through the 'castle wall' without

using the V-shaped ‘castle gate’.”

“Even when it’s running out of railgun shells and the chemicals needed for its lasers and low-stability plasma cannons and when it’s fighting another Object at an even level? Also, this ‘castle gate’ is the shortest route. Trying to break through anywhere else would be taking the long way around,” explained Heivia smoothly.

Then again, he had no actual proof.

Quenser ran toward the V-shaped “castle gate”.

“The tools and equipment needed for the ‘floor heater’ have already been dropped down, right?”

“Yes, they were slipped in outside the range of the Object’s anti-air lasers. The presents dropped by parachute from a transport plane should be around here somewhere.” Heivia pointed at some large cloths waving in the wind here and there. “But the wiring for activating it has been untouched. We need to hurry. An Object’s top speed is over 500 kph. It can travel 30 kilometers in just a few minutes if it wants to.”

Quenser gathered the explosives and equipment scattered around the area, removed the parachutes, untied the ropes, and pulled the contents from the bags. The “floor heater” was contained within a cylinder the size of a metal drum. He connected several cords and cables to it, spread it out like a scroll, and covered it with a thin layer of fine-grained sand.

After spreading out several metal drum-sized bundles, the “floor heater” covered an area of 50 meters square.

Heivia had passed through the V-shaped “castle gate” and circled to the back of the “castle wall”. He was connecting several cylinders 50 cm wide and a meter tall. They reached several dozen meters in length all together.

That was their power source.

However, it was not a battery.

Quenser stretched a reel-shaped cable from the “floor heater” and approached Heivia.

“How’s the explosion generator looking?”

“The explosives look fine.”

“I’d heard of magnetic cumulation and MHD generators, but this is a really rough mechanism. A giant magnet is placed in the center of a long coil, and a powerful high voltage current is created all at once by firing it at extremely high speed.”

“Don’t mess up the timing. An explosion generator can only create electricity once. Honestly, our missions are always gambles, aren’t they?”

“A normal battery won’t create enough energy to stop an Object, so we have no other choice. Froleytia dragged out this relatively impractical explosion generator because we need to create a massive amount of electricity in an instant.”

Quenser and Heivia connected the “floor heater” with the explosion generator.

But this was not enough to activate it.

The explosives in the explosion generator had to be detonated with an electric fuse. In other words, they needed another, smaller battery.

They had to prepare that.

“The detonation should be handled by cable, right?”

“Wireless would be more convenient, but that might not work if the Object jams us.”

As Quenser answered that question, he recalled how impressive the Faith Organization’s Object was.

The Strategic Antenna.

“It’s a second generation Object with tons of radars and sensors, right? It uses its many different location and targeting systems to make sure its attacks hit. And on top of that, it uses jamming and dummy targets to prevent its enemy from even getting a lock. Its radars and sensors outweigh its cannons, so it obviously has no normal layout.”

Objects were 50 meters tall and weighed 200,000 tons, but they could pull off the footwork of a mixed martial artist at speeds of over 500 kph.

When two Objects faced each other and fired their main cannons at each other, they would not always hit. The princess belonging to Quenser and Heivia’s Legitimacy Kingdom army specialized in detecting upcoming attacks from the slight movements of her opponent’s cannons and then quickly evading.

Nevertheless, the princess had been hit several times and a few holes had almost been opened in her armor.

Fortunately, the Strategic Antenna had added an excessive number of radars and sensors and sacrificed the firepower of its weapons. In exchange for its amazing accuracy, it could not finish off an enemy in a single strike. However, the princess could not let her guard down. If enough damage accumulated, she could be incapacitated or even destroyed.

Quenser checked on the connections of the various cables, pulled out his radio, and stuck a cable into the wired connection jack. He looked at the radio and the long, long cable extending from it.

“We’re going to hide all this under the sand, but the Strategic Antenna’s various sensors can’t detect things buried in the ground, can they? I’m worried about the explosion generator’s coil, too. Will the V-shaped ‘castle wall’ shield it enough?”

“Our objective is to activate the ‘floor heater’ below its feet.” Heivia was crouched down elsewhere carrying out his own work. “As long as it’s driven here, that’s enough. If the Strategic Antenna notices the trap and slows down even a little, the princess will use that chance to fire a main cannon into it. No matter how pathetic and

disgraceful the result, we win as long as the Object is blown away in the end."

"I'd actually prefer that to happen. If the Object blows up here, we might be turned to ash along with it. Even if we hide behind the V-shaped 'castle wall', it could still crumble on top of us." Quenser stroked his thumb over his radio button. "But what about you, noble son? Don't you want the honor of a victory?"

"There are different kinds of honor. I can't exactly inherit my family with the posthumous variety, now can I?"

As Heivia replied, they heard an ominous sound similar to thunder clouds approaching in the distance. That was the sound of a giant Object floating with static electricity.

"Dammit! It's already here! We don't have much time left!!"

"Did the princess relax once she saw us go on ahead? It looks like she's leaving fate up to us," said Heivia while moving his hands. But then he clicked his tongue quite loudly. "Wait a second, Quenser! Get over here!!"

"What is it? I'm busy with the final test!!"

"The 'floor heater's' activation battery is messed up!!"

Quenser looked over in shock. Heivia was lightly shaking a box-shaped battery similar to a car battery. It had a few thick cables connected to the terminals, but the "awaiting activation" notification had yet to appear on the LCD screen of Quenser's radio. It had no power.

"It didn't run out of power like a cell phone left alone for too long, did it!?"

"It's the sand, dammit! Too much fine-grained sand got in the terminal area and now it won't work!! It's completely shorted out!!"

Without that power source, the electric fuse to detonate the explosion generator's explosives could not be used and that meant the entire device would not work. Without the massive amount of

electricity created by the device, they could not activate the “floor heater” to stop the Object.

If they could not stop the Strategic Antenna, the situation changed completely. The princess was on the losing side of the one-on-one battle. She was likely assuming that she could win if she only lured the Strategic Antenna into the V-shaped “castle gate”. She was going all out and forcing her way into disadvantageous situations because of that assumption.

If they failed here, it was all over.

It was like a runner reaching the end of a full marathon and being told he was at the halfway point and had to run the same distance again.

The thunder cloud-like sound of the static electricity grew louder.

The princess’s Baby Magnum and the Faith Organization’s Strategic Antenna could be seen approaching while continuing to fight.

They would arrive in less than three minutes.

“Hey, Heivia! Can we use a brush or something to get the sand off the battery!?”

“The inside of the battery has already been fried!! Even if you risk electrocuting yourself by cleaning it out, the battery isn’t gonna work!!”

“What do we do?” muttered Quenser under his breath.

At this rate, they could not activate the “floor heater”.

The Strategic Antenna could not be defeated by the princess’s Object alone. In fact, a mistake here could lead to her Object being destroyed.

Quenser stood silently, but he was not thinking. He was mostly staring blankly at a hopeless situation.

But he caught sight of something in the corner of his eye and slowly

turned his head.

“…The motorcycle.”

“What?”

“Check the amperage and voltage of that battery!! If the motorcycle’s battery is the same, we can swap them out and activate the ‘floor heater’!!”

Heivia moved as if struck.

He used his tools to remove the motorcycle’s battery and checked the numbers written on it. Even from a distance, Quenser could tell the battery was about two sizes smaller, but Heivia did not stop moving. It seemed to have the same values. Heivia hurried back to the V-shaped ‘castle gate’, removed the cords from the broken battery, and attached them to the motorcycle’s battery.

An electronic tone sounded.

It came from Quenser’s radio. A simple character indicating it was awaiting input appeared on the small LCD screen. The system for activating the ‘floor heater’ using an explosion generator now had power.

But they had no time to celebrate.

“Shit! Here it comes!!” shouted Heivia as he hid on the edge of the V-shaped “castle gate”.

Quenser leaped toward the exact opposite edge. The two of them stuck their heads out from the left and right and watched the approaching Object.

The Strategic Antenna was five kilometers away.

It could now enter the “castle gate” in less than a minute.

Despite being several kilometers away, it had such a sense of intimidation that they felt their throats dry up. They sweated for a reason completely unrelated to the heat of the desert.

“This is where hell truly begins,” muttered Quenser under his breath.

Part 4

The radio in Quenser's hand was the switch to activate the "floor heater" using the explosion generator. The explosion generator could create a massive amount of energy but only for an instant, so messing up the timing would mean the failure of the operation.

The radio was connected by a cable over 100 meters long.

If he hit the switch just as the Strategic Antenna passed over the "floor heater", a large amount of static electricity would be generated which would disturb the static electricity keeping the Object afloat. That would stop its movements for a few seconds to a dozen seconds.

If the princess fired one of her main cannons in that time, the Strategic Antenna would be unable to evade.

Quenser would be lying if he said he was not worried.

Even if the operation was a complete success, the Strategic Antenna would end up exploding very close by. He was hiding behind the V-shaped "castle gate" 100 meters away from the "floor heater", but he had no idea how much that would help. In the worst case, he would be enveloped in the blast when the Object was destroyed.

And if the Strategic Antenna noticed he was hiding there, it would likely aim its ridiculously huge main cannon at him. Even if he was a normal soldier with no real power of his own, this battlefield was not kind enough to overlook someone who was clearly leading you into a trap. Naturally, a flesh-and-blood soldier could do nothing if he was targeted by that monstrous weapon. This was not an attack he could avoid by leaping out of the way like in an action movie.

However…

(I have to do this. If I don't, we'll be cornered. In that case, I need to try everything I can.)

The hand holding the radio was damp with sweat.

The Strategic Antenna would be arriving soon.

(The countdown has begun.)

For fear of having his voice picked up by the Object's sensors, he avoided even muttering under his breath.

His own pulse sounded unpleasantly loud in his ears amid the extreme silence.

And then Quenser saw something odd. It was Heivia. Heivia was hiding on the opposite side of the V-shaped "castle gate", but he was leaning out and waving at Quenser. He seemed to be trying to tell Quenser something with his body language, but Quenser was not sure what. Nevertheless, this was not normal. Even if they were hidden, that could cause them to be spotted by the Strategic Antenna.

Heivia looked irritated that Quenser did not understand. He gave up and pulled out something that looked like a small grenade. It was a cannon that could be held in one hand and fired shells the size of 500 mL drink bottles. However, it was also commonly used to send necessary ammunition and equipment between allies. Heivia used a hand signal to tell Quenser it would not explode and then pulled the grenade trigger to fire something toward where Quenser was hiding.

The capsule flew over 100 meters and landed in the sand at Quenser's feet. It contained a small device.

(A radio?)

Quenser's radio was connected to the "floor heater" with a cable, so he had set it to not receive any other transmissions. He must have missed some information sent to the Legitimacy Kingdom unit.

Wondering what it could be, Quenser picked up the radio Heivia had sent him.

The following words came from the second radio:

“I repeat.”

That phrase meant something had already been stated in full.

“This is the 9th Platoon. We are deployed near Roadshow City. During our patrol, we spotted a Faith Organization transport unit. It seems they were transporting supplies for the Strategic Antenna’s attachCOIL…that is, its main laser cannon. Anyway, the situation has grown very bad.”

The route Quenser’s unit and the Strategic Antenna had been focusing on travelled from north to south. Roadshow City was approximately 40 kilometers west of the “castle gate”. The Strategic Antenna’s original role may have been to slaughter any opposing forces nearby and then meet up with the transport unit to allow those materials to safely reach their base.

The 9th Platoon belonged to the same Legitimacy Kingdom military as Quenser, but it was not under Froleytia’s command. Most likely, it had been trying to limit the Strategic Antenna’s actions by keeping those supplies from it.

“We don’t know how long we can use this radio, so this may be hopeless. But we will continue making our request as long as we can. The Faith Organization has used a carbon weapon. A large amount of an extremely fine carbon powder was scattered. It is meant to enter through a vehicle’s radiator or a computer’s cooling opening to fry the insides of the devices.”

“!”

Quenser understood what the soldier was trying to say.

A carbon weapon was a special weapon developed to rob an enemy army of their ability to fight by destroying their vehicles and electronic devices and nothing else. However, the carbon powder used was too fine-grained. It made its way into people’s lungs and accumulated to the point of leaving severe respiratory damage. For that reason, its use had been banned by a war treaty.

At this rate, the 9th Platoon would be annihilated.

“If any unit can hear us, please bring chemical weapon masks, explosives, and radio detonators. This is being caused by the carbon powder, so we might be able to eradicate it by causing a dust explosion.”

Quenser recalled where the different units had been deployed and then shook his head. It was hopeless. The closest unit to the 9th Platoon was Quenser’s. However, they would not make it in time to rescue them even if they headed out right away. The carbon powder in the wind would envelop the platoon before they arrived.

Despite knowing it was impossible, Quenser spoke into the radio.

“Can you hear me? You need to get out of there right away. We can’t go rescue you. The Strategic Antenna is right in front of us.”

“Dammit. I had started to assume as much when I received no response after four times, but I guess we aren’t the only ones faced with hell.” The soldier sounded as if he were smiling bitterly. “Then we have no choice. Maybe we can use the off-road vehicle that stalled. At the very least, we might be able to cause a dust explosion by blowing it up.”

“You’ll be caught in the blast! Even if you can escape the flames, the great consumption of oxygen will leave you without air!!”

Quenser almost clicked his tongue. He knew it was almost impossible, but he desperately thought up another idea.

“The carbon weapon is being spread by the wind, but it isn’t faster than a car. Get out of there as fast as you can!! That will save you. If you evacuate temporarily in this situation, it won’t count as desertion!!”

“If we could, we would have done so long ago. We had to abandon our pursuit of the Faith Organization’s transportation unit because our armored vehicles blew a few tires.”

“How many vehicles do you have? You can use duct tape to…no, that wouldn’t work. Oh, I know! Instant glue! If you seal off all of the cracks in the doors and stuff cloth or something in the air

conditioning vents, there's a chance you can outlast the storm caused by the carbon weapon!! You don't need to cause a dust explosion!!"

"We don't know how far this goddamn carbon powder will spread," cut in the soldier. "Roadshow City isn't very far away. If it reaches the city, it'll be the people of Oceania who suffer. If their vehicles and electronics are taken out, their rescue system will be paralyzed. Who knows how far the damage will spread."

"…!!"

Roadshow City was where the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization planned to hold the signing ceremony for Oceania's declaration of peace. If it fell victim to the carbon weapon, the signing ceremony would be a waste. In the worst case, it could lead to a long, drawn-out war in Oceania between the four world powers.

(Does this Greek mythology unit plan to withdraw after pulling the trigger of war!?)

"Don't worry. They only grew desperate and used this carbon weapon because we didn't finish them off. We will take care of this. You focus on the Strategic Antenna. We know how horrific an opponent an Object is."

"Dammit," muttered Quenser.

He knew the one way of saving that platoon about to be swallowed up by the carbon weapon.

Yes.

There was a way.

For an instant, Quenser wondered if it was really necessary to go that far. He was a student. He had been sent to the battlefield to learn about Object design. He was fighting this war to quickly obtain an excellent academic background, get rich, and, despite being a commoner, earn a social standing higher than the lower levels of the nobles. Before he thought about justice or the direction

the war was headed, he had to make sure he survived. Putting himself in danger was greatly opposed to his goal.

"…"

Quenser knew that, but he could not remain silent.

He looked over at Heivia who was hiding on the opposite side of the V-shaped "castle gate". He was shaking his head. He seemed to be saying "stop". He likely knew what Quenser was thinking. And knowing that, he was telling him to stop.

Nevertheless, it had been Heivia who had given Quenser the radio and thus the final say in the matter.

Quenser remained silent for a moment and then brought the radio up to his mouth.

However, he was not speaking to the soldier from that platoon.

"Quenser to the princess in the Baby Magnum," he said while mustering all of his courage to move his trembling lips. "We will handle the Strategic Antenna. You go rescue the area around Roadshow City."

Yes.

An Object could move at speeds exceeding 500 kph. Even if Quenser and the others could not make it in time, the princess could just barely make it.

And an Object was a monstrous weapon that could not be finished off even with a nuclear strike. Even if she blew away the carbon weapon in a dust explosion and was caught in the blast, the princess would be fine.

However…

If the princess's Object left the battle here…

"Quenser!!" cried the princess.

“If you hesitate, my courage might waver, so get going. We don’t have time. If you don’t go all out, not even you will make it in time! You of course need to save the 9th Platoon, but you also need to save Roadshow City. If it’s taken out, we will lose the timing for the signing ceremony and the four world powers of the coalition could easily begin waging war here!! If that happens, no one can say how much the people of Oceania will be dragged into it all!! So go!! Hurry!!”

“…!!”

The distance between the two battling Objects suddenly increased.

The princess was withdrawing.

She slowed once as if hesitating, but her Object quickly disappeared at full speed toward Roadshow City. She likely wanted to rescue the unit and return as quickly as possible.

But she would not make it.

The Faith Organization Object would obviously reach the V-shaped “castle gate” sooner.

Heivia was shouting something while ignoring the risk of giving away their location. Even if he had not heard the details of the conversation, he understood what it meant for their Object to leave. Quenser thought as he listened to Heivia’s shouting. He had done nothing wrong. There had been no better option. The carbon weapon was about to envelop a unit of a few dozen people. It nothing was done, it could even reach Roadshow City. It could bring back a supposedly ended war in the worst possible way. The carbon weapon would decide the direction of the entire war, so it was more important in the long term than the Strategic Antenna. For that reason, Quenser had made the best choice. He was sure he would be proud of his decision someday.

However…

“To hell with this,” he spat out as he threw the radio forcefully into the sandy ground.

A strange feeling had exploded within Quenser's chest. It was an ugly and black feeling. The massive destructive power of the giant Object seemed to be half-forcefully dragging something out of the depths of his heart.

"To hell with this," muttered Quenser again.

A minute trembling had appeared somewhere in his body and it spread across his body in no time at all.

It was impossible. There was no way they could win.

Their plan had been to allow the Object to be used to its fullest, but that crucial Object had left. There was no hope of victory left. Even if they activated the "floor heater", it would be meaningless. Quenser and Heivia would definitely be killed.

(Why did it have to happen at a time like this?)

If the carbon weapon had been scattered just a few minutes later, everything would have ended without issue.

Quenser honestly felt he would have not hesitated to say no rescue was coming if he could redo that conversation now. He would have refused to give up the Object. He would have forced his own convenience onto them and switched off the radio. He was sure of it.

As he sat there trembling, Quenser finally began to move.

An oddly raw light could be seen in his eyes.

"That was wonderful, Quenser," said Froleytia over the radio. "That was the right decision. Overall, stopping a long, drawn-out war between the four world powers takes precedence over the immediate battle."

She had not used her authority to send the princess back to the "castle gate". That was likely because she thought she might have made the same decision under the same conditions.

She went on to say, "But what will you do about the Strategic

Antenna!? If it passes through the ‘castle gate’ we will be at a severe disadvantage!! If you are going to change my strategy without permission, then don’t leave things half done!! Give me a method of resolving all of the problems!! Don’t tell me you are fine with being the one in the most danger!”

“That just means we have to take care of this ourselves, right!?”

Quenser was actually more panicked than even he knew, so he half shouted back at her. This was no way to speak to his commanding officer.

“You’ll overlook this if I find a means of destroying the Strategic Antenna that is more effective and certain than having the princess take care of it after activating the ‘floor heater’ below it, right!? Then just watch!! I’ll earn a medal right before your eyes!!”

The sound of someone clicking their tongue came over the radio.

She was conflicted because Quenser’s decisions had been correct in the big picture and because she could find no way of aiding him as his commander. She normally acted horribly cold, but she never abandoned her subordinates in the very, very end.

After a short hesitation, Froleytia finally spoke.

“You have permission to take action, so do something about the Strategic Antenna. That is all.”

She ended the transmission there.

Quenser stared down at the radio for a while and finally shouted toward his partner as if he had gotten over his worries.

“Dammit. Heivia! The strategy doesn’t matter anymore!! Who cares about our orders!? We just have to find a way out of this on our own! That will keep any of our allies from dying!!”

“Don’t decide that for me, you piece of shit! We need to escape that thing’s cannons first!! I don’t see how we can get out of here alive!”

The Strategic Antenna was unmistakably heading toward the V-

shaped “castle gate” where Quenser and Heivia were. If it found them, they were dead. That Object could collect an overwhelming amount of information with all its sensors and radars, so it was near impossible that it would overlook them. No matter where they hid and even if they dug underground, the Strategic Antenna would certainly locate them and fire on them.

A cold sweat covered Quenser’s body.

He did not have enough oxygen. He felt like he had forgotten how to breathe.

That giant Object was approaching.

Were they already within range of its cannons?

It was able to kill them at any time, but would it choose to avoid an instant death and torment them first?

Was there anything they could use against it?

Quenser knew there was not, but he still glanced around. His eyes stopped on the remains of the battery half-buried in the sand in the open area of the “castle gate” a few dozen meters ahead.

That was the battery originally prepared for the “floor heater”. It had shorted out after getting too much fine-grained sand in it.

“…”

Quenser’s entire body stiffened for a moment.

He pulled out his handheld device and accessed the military network. He could gather all sorts of information there: data from the electronic simulation department, maps of the battlefield based on military satellite images, etc. Quenser chose to recheck the local weather information. He received the worst possible answer. The event Quenser had hoped for would never occur. The situation was simply too bad.

However, Quenser moved his slender fingers and accessed further information.

And then he muttered to himself.

“We might just survive this.”

Part 5

Meanwhile, the Object known as the Strategic Antenna to the Legitimacy Kingdom and as Aphrodite to the Faith Organization had detected the two enemy soldiers hiding behind the V-shaped “castle gate”. In addition to simple video data, it had accurately detected their location from the heat of their bodies, the sound of their pulses, and the faint magnetic field produced by a human body.

It had also confirmed the presence of the explosion generator and some other device buried in the sand.

But no matter what kind of trap it was, flesh-and-blood soldiers could not destroy an Object. It had likely been prepared to use alongside their Object.

Aphrodite did not immediately kill them because the pilot was curious about the enemy Object leaving the battle. Aphrodite was an Object that specialized in its sensors and radars. It had intercepted all of the enemy’s transmissions and signals. And based on that, the pilot began to wonder if those transmissions had been faked to lead him into some kind of trap. Those two soldiers could be bait.

But that seemed to be a needless fear.

From the information gathered in the battle so far, he had a decent estimate of the range of the enemy Object’s main cannons. And that enemy had moved outside of that range. The odds of a surprise attack were close to zero.

In that case, he needed to hurry up and kill those soldiers and then pass through the V-shaped “castle gate”.

Once he arrived at the maintenance base near Lake Carnegie, he could replenish the chemicals needed for the attachCOIL main cannon. If he succeeded in that, he would no longer need to act so carefully out of fear of running out of ammunition. He could fight

all he wanted with the dangerous Legitimacy Kingdom Object and create all sorts of situations in which he could destroy it.

And just as he thought that, intense noise ran through the data being taken from the Aphrodite's sensors and radars.

The Aphrodite was a cutting edge second generation Object developed to specialize in information gathering, but static ran across its monitors.

And that noise did not affect only the Strategic Antenna.

Quenser's vision was robbed in an instant as he watched on.

He found it difficult to see even a few meters ahead. All Quenser could see was the general shadow of the giant Object.

The same was true for his ears.

He had no desire to open his mouth and try to taste it.

If he opened his tightly clenched lips even slightly, he felt his mouth would be instantly filled with sand down to the back of his throat.

Yes.

The static had a very simple cause.

It was a desert sandstorm.

Even the color of the sky had changed. The sunlight was partially blotted out. In dim light similar to a cloudy day, the roar of blowing wind and the sensation of fine-grained sand all over his body were both oddly clear.

The Strategic Antenna's cannons moved as if writhing.

These were not the main cannon. They were the 100 smaller cannons installed all across the Object's spherical body. However,

that was no consolation to Quenser and Heivia.

Any cannon installed on an Object was enough to crush a human.

Quenser gave up hiding on the edge of the V-shaped “castle gate” and charged out toward the flat and open desert.

“Run, Heivia!!”

“Are you stupid!? Do you want to die!?”

“The Strategic Antenna has lost sight of us!! If we stay where we were, it’ll hit us!!”

Heivia’s eyes opened wide and he half-leaped out from behind cover.

Shortly thereafter, large-caliber coilguns let out a roar.

Two shells broke the sound barrier to the point of exceeding Mach 8. They struck the spots Quenser and Heivia had been hiding in and sent shockwaves scattering out.

The Strategic Antenna had lost sight of its enemies, so it had fired on their last known locations. The edges of the V-shaped “castle gate” broke and it was forcibly widened. Large chunks of rock rained down on the desert.

The two boys could no longer hear.

They had not been directly struck, but they had still been hit by a tremendous impact which sent them flying several meters through the air.

“Gbh. What?” As he rolled across the sand, Heivia spoke out of confusion more than pain. “Why can’t it find us when we’re right in front of it?”

“The sandstorm protected us.”

“Just hiding us on the video footage wouldn’t be enough. The Strategic Antenna has tons of different types of sensors.”

“The desert can exceed 40 degrees during midday. When the air is whipped up like this, it can’t distinguish our body heat from the air. The iron sand mixed in with the rest of the sand neutralizes the magnetic sensors. Why it can’t hear us is obvious: it sounds like metal sheets are being scraped together next to our ears and this din is covering the entire area. It can’t use any of its sensors.”

“That’s a nice explanation, but it comes down to being lucky, doesn’t it? If this sandstorm hadn’t conveniently occurred, what would we have done?”

“This is no coincidence.” Quenser gave a bitter smile while lying on the ground. “The princess headed for the Roadshow City area 40 kilometers away from here, remember? Her plan was to blow away the Faith Organization’s carbon weapon with a dust explosion.”

“You don’t mean…”

“That isn’t a simple explosive blast. A large-scale explosion consumes the oxygen in the air and creates a change in atmospheric pressure. All of that ultimately produces a local violent wind.”

Quenser had researched some things on his handheld device earlier.

In addition to the weather data, he had checked the electronic simulation department’s data. Also, the Great Sandy Desert had sandstorm weather sensors set up along the path of the wired internet connection. Quenser had acquired the simulation and the real data he needed to back it up.

“So that’s it. God dammit. So you’ve proven that this world occasionally rewards good people. I’m so happy I think I’m gonna cry.”

“There is one other thing I want to prove,” said Quenser as he began crawling forward along the ground.

Of all things, he was crawling toward the Strategic Antenna.

“H-hey, Quenser? What is it you want to prove!?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” answered Quenser without looking back toward

Heivia who had frantically begun to follow him. “A method of destroying that Object.”

Part 6

After ten minutes, the sandstorm died down.

Quenser and Heivia lay face up in the middle of the desert. The Strategic Antenna was already gone. It had been unable to detect them to the very end.

“So it ultimately came to nothing,” said the incredibly cold voice of Froleytia over the radio. “I suppose I should praise you for managing not to get yourselves killed. But no matter the reason, you altered the entire unit’s strategy without permission and then failed to produce any results. That is the truth. Prepare to be thrown into the detention barracks.”

“Not so fast,” replied Quenser as he wiped sand from his hair. “I found a way.”

To put it simply, the Strategic Antenna had lost sight of Quenser and Heivia due to the sandstorm.

At first glance, that result did not seem contradictory.

However, there was one clearly odd point.

“Did you notice, Heivia?”

“Damn you. Is that what you wanted to prove? We really are gathering information with our own lives, aren’t we?”

“The sandstorm died down,” said Quenser as he sat up and spat out sand. “Yet the Strategic Antenna was unable to find us.”

“The curtain of sand did more than get in the way of its sensors.”

“The massive amount of hot sand, iron sand, and everything else coated the sensors and radars and prevented them from functioning.”

Quenser recalled the battery that had stopped working once sand

got inside. Most likely, that had been due to a sandstorm. The Faith Organization's carbon weapon also destroyed electronics using fine particles.

"Come to think of it, the Objects stationed in Oceania were brought in from around the world to stop that military nation's tyranny," said Heivia in annoyance as he sat up as well. "In the Greek mythology part of Europe, the Strategic Antenna could go all out without having to worry about sandstorms. In a one-on-one fight there, our princess might have lost."

"But it wasn't used to the desert," added Quenser as he wiped more sand from his hair. "And unlike the Strategic Antenna, our princess's Baby Magnum has given no report about a sandstorm affecting its sensors." He removed the "floor heater" cable from his radio and started back toward the motorcycle. "Let's try to come up with a way of artificially producing a sandstorm. If we can't, let's find another way of scattering sand around. Maybe we just need to fire an Object cannon into the ground. At any rate, we need to calculate out the necessary amount of sand and the exact method needed."

"That Object might have something like windshield wipers. Maybe a device that uses a negative electric charge to shoot off any particles stuck on it."

"Even if it does, it has to wait for the sandstorm to die down. I doubt it can handle a sandstorm that continues sending more and more sand onto it. If we can use this method to help the Baby Magnum, we can finally fight back against the Strategic Antenna."

Quenser then gave a final comment in a tone of voice that silenced even Froleytia who was still angry over his changes to her strategy.

"We can destroy that monster."

Part 7

The Object known as the Strategic Antenna to the Legitimacy Kingdom and as Aphrodite to the Faith Organization arrived safely at the Faith Organization maintenance base zone.

The boy pilot Elite exited from the top of the 50 meter Object, walked along the scaffolding set up around it, walked down some stairs, and finally arrived on the ground.

He had lost sight of the enemy soldiers due to the sudden sandstorm, but everything else had gone well.

He could not take the Legitimacy Kingdom Object lightly, but it was not an opponent he could not defeat. Aphrodite's sensors and radars could accurately read his opponent's movements and its various types of jamming prevented that opponent from reading his own movements. There was no way he could lose in a battle between Objects.

And once the chemicals needed for his attachCOIL main cannon were replenished at the maintenance base zone, the difference in battle ability would change dramatically.

And then the boy Elite noticed something.

Aphrodite was the type of Object that floated just off the ground using static electricity. Just like a hovercraft, the trick was to efficiently distribute the weight by making the bottom into a flat board shape.

The float towered above like a cliff.

And something had been written in black marker on the side of that cliff.

It was written in the alphabetic language mainly used by the Legitimacy Kingdom.

The pilot Elite read the words written there.

“You won’t be so lucky next time.”

The boy Elite froze in place for a moment.

His shoulders then began to shake slowly. He was laughing. When he pictured this unseen enemy approaching that close, that Object pilot lightly tapped the back of his hand on the words written on the side of the float.

As he did, he spoke quietly.

“This should be fun.”